"After Trayvon" Events Create Awareness

By Lupe Davidson

On July 12, George Zimmerman was found not guilty of the murder of Trayvon Martin. In response, the Women's and Gender Studies Center for Social Justice held a public forum “After Trayvon,” on Aug. 29. Bringing together faculty from a diverse spectrum of the university, “After Trayvon” represented a chance for faculty, students, staff and the Norman community to have a wide-ranging discussion on the topics of violence, race, Stand Your Ground law and social justice. “After Trayvon” was awarded the “Diversity Program of the Month” from the National Association of Colleges and University Residence Halls.

To continue the conversation that began with “After Trayvon,” the Center for Social Justice offered an activist training program titled “Know Justice/Know Peace: Activism in the Wake of Tragedy” (co-sponsored with the OU Women’s Outreach Center). This interactive panel brought together a group of activist/intellectuals who shared their stories about engaging in activism and talked to students about various activist strategies.

The Race Card Project, the final event in this series, was held on Oct. 30. Students and facilitators were asked to distill their thoughts about race and racism down to a simple six-word sentence. Co-sponsored with the OU Writing Center, The Race Card Project was a powerful night of sharing and listening.
Get to Know an Alum: Sarah Blaney

By Conner Ferguson

Sarah Blaney graduated in May 2005 with an undergraduate degree in Women's Studies, and in 2011 she received her master's degree in political management from the George Washington University. Since graduating in 2005, Blaney has pursued work in politics and nonprofit fund-raising. She has worked extensively in the political sphere for several incumbent state representatives, members of the U.S. Congress, and congressional candidates.

Currently, Blaney is the director of development and capacity building for a state-wide conservation organization, the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts. She also assists as a development associate for the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Library system.

This past year, Blaney was the recipient of the Heartland Emmy for her work as project manager on the documentary titled Lessons from the Dust Bowl. The Dust Bowl is a film by Ken Burns that examines ecological disasters in American history.

Blaney states that she will continue working in the nonprofit sector to improve the community and “maybe one day, end up at a foundation as a program officer. It's hard to say what all goals I have; I've learned that life can be more surreal than anything you can dream of.”

When asked about the influence of OU's WGS program, Blaney replied, “the greatest gift of studying women's studies was that I learned critical-thinking skills. Women's studies taught me to ask questions and to always consider where information was coming from and who would benefit most from certain versions of truth.”

Blaney currently resides in Oklahoma City with her miniature dachshund, Daphne.

Activist in Residence: Gwendolyn Fields

By Mallory Gladstein

The Center for Social Justice is delighted to introduce our Activist-in-Residence, Gwendolyn Fields. Our first event with Fields was a panel discussion titled “The Not So Merry Go-Round: Stopping the Cycle of Incarcerating Women and their Children” on Nov. 4.

Fields currently is the executive director of the Advocacy Council, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to end mass incarceration. An accomplished advocate, Fields is passionate about securing the needs of people within communities most severely impacted by mass incarceration in Oklahoma. Her passion for reform was ignited in 1997 after being sentenced to 59 years in prison for property crime (writing “insufficient funds” checks on her own checking account). She understands the many ways in which people of color are challenged and marginalized and has developed a public education strategy to reframe conversations within, and influence resistant public attitudes about, these communities. Her most recent work involves organizing a grassroots coalition against prison profiteering (private, for-profit prison corporations lobbying for tough-on-crime legislation).

Fields began her public career in 2009 as an executive assistant to Oklahoma State Senator Constance Johnson. She was instrumental in writing legislation to eliminate Life Without Parole as a punishment for drug offenses; use of three-strikes type enhancers in non-violent and drug offenses; grace periods for post incarceration fees and fines; and use of rehabilitation rather than incarceration for low-level drug offenders (continued on page 3).

The 2013-2014 Activist in Residence, Gwendolyn Fields.
Activist in Residence: Gwendolyn Fields (continued)

Fields grew up in Oklahoma and graduated from the University of Oklahoma with a bachelor of science in multidisciplinary studies, with an oil and gas asset management concentration. Fields has three sons, Joshua, Jeremy and Justin, and four grandchildren, Iris, Isis, Lorenzo and Dion, who all live near her in the Oklahoma City area.

Past Activists-in-Residence have included nationally touring poet, teaching artist and activist, Lauren Zuniga; Pradma Menon, queer feminist activist from India working internationally on social justice and human rights; and activist, feminist organizer for reproductive justice and sexual health, and blogger, Shelby Knox.

Students Celebrate Love Your Body Day

Each year since I have been teaching Body Image vs. Reality, the students have commemorated Love Your Body Day by having some kind of activity. The Women's and Gender Studies Program gave us the support we needed to do more than we ever have before.

The 2013 Body Image vs. Reality students planned quite a few activities. The students made T-shirts that said “Love Your Body” that we wore during class and our activities. Several students reported being hesitant to wear their shirts to their other classes, but a few were approached and were glad to start a dialogue on issues relating to body image.

One student shared her experience with her professor from an earlier class: “He read my shirt and started walking toward me... he said, ‘I am very happy that you can wear a shirt that has such a strong meaning behind those words’ — Love Your Body.”

The Love Your Body Day campaign is an annual event that started in 1998 by the National Organization of Women as a response to media’s “narrow and unhealthy ideals of beauty.” On this day, “women and girls are encouraged to talk back to the media, to demand images that reflect the full spectrum of womanhood in all its many sizes, colors, ages, ethnicities, abilities and gender presentations.” Abby, a student in the Body Image class, said, “I had never even heard about Love Your Body Day until this class, so I am especially glad that the Body Image vs. Reality course gave me the opportunity to learn about and become a part of such an influential day. It is such a great message that anyone can benefit from, and I hope it continues to reach more and more people with its inspiring and positive message about true beauty.”

The students set up a table in front of Kaufman Hall in the South Oval Oct. 16. At the table, students had hundreds of store-bought candy and homemade baked goods. The students put them in the plastic bags and put inspirational messages on them to give to the students passing by in between classes. Another group handed out candy taped to handwritten notes. They also gave information on how to develop a positive body image. Other activities included handing out balloons with inspirational messages written on them. They also chalked, put up posters and sticky notes, and gave people compliments as they passed by.

Raven, a Body Image student, said, “The experience of watching people’s faces as we gave them compliments and handed out pamphlets about loving your body and how to get emotionally healthier was priceless. Being able to tell people that they were beautiful and in some way help them with their confidence that day was something that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.”

By Roksana Alavi

Students in Roksana Alavi’s Body Image vs. Reality class celebrate Love Your Body Day on the South Oval on Oct. 16. Photo provided by Roksana Alavi
Students Attend Benefit Night, Hear Gloria Steinem Speak

Steinem commented on the political atmosphere of Oklahoma and how it relates to women's rights. Women's reproductive rights have been the cause of much political debate in the state. Steinem focused on the organization's efforts to give women the right to choose.

She also encouraged the audience to become advocates for change within their own communities. “It is easy to get discouraged living in Oklahoma and to believe that nothing I do or say actually has an impact on anything. However, as Steinem said, if I believe as if everything I do matters, I will be more receptive to seeing the small changes I am making in my community,” said WGS senior Kelsey Kolbe.

Many students and the faculty were pleasantly surprised to see that the more than 850 people in attendance came from all age groups, races and genders. “It was nice being around so many people who had an interest in women’s choices. Since I am new to Oklahoma, it was great to see such solidarity on important issues,” said WGS professor Megan Sibbett.

Students had the opportunity to network at the event. “We had great discussions at the table during dinner, and we were able to bond over shared experiences and mutual admiration for Gloria Steinem and the work of Planned Parenthood,” said graduate student Lena Tenney. Some attendees even had the unique opportunity to meet with Steinem after her speech.

The students and faculty would like to thank Mock for the amazing opportunity to hear Steinem speak on important issues that affect us all. “I am not exaggerating when I say that it was one of the best nights of my life,” said Kolbe. “I think it has made me far more passionate about activism, particularly in Oklahoma itself.”

By Lyndsey Smith

On Sept. 21 the Planned Parenthood of Central Oklahoma hosted a benefit night titled CHOICES 2013. Students and faculty in the Women's and Gender Studies Program were able to attend the event, thanks to the generous donation of Randall Mock. The benefit night featured a silent auction, art sale, dinner and keynote speech by celebrated feminist icon Gloria Steinem.
Take Root Conference Preview

4th annual conference
February 21-22, 2014
Norman, Oklahoma

By Valarie Lambert

The Center for Social Justice at OU is excited about the upcoming fourth annual Take Root: Red State Perspectives on Reproductive Justice conference. Take Root will be held Feb. 21 and 22, 2014 on the OU Norman campus.

The two-day conference will bring together Oklahoma activists as well as participants from New York, Texas, Wisconsin, Kansas, New Mexico, Arkansas and Mississippi, to name a few states. Activists, students and educators will gather to discuss working in the field of reproductive justice in traditionally "red" states, highlighting regional issues, HIV/AIDS, sexual and domestic violence, and much more.

We will kick off Take Root the last week of January with an exciting visitor to OU and Oklahoma State University. Miriam Yeung, executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, will offer a series of events pertaining to social justice and reproductive justice on campus for OU students and the community. NAPAWF is the "country's only national, multi-issue, progressive organization dedicated to social justice and human rights for Asian and Pacific Islander women and girls in the U.S." (napawf.org).

Take Root will feature many distinguished speakers, including Lyn Paltrow, founder and executive director of the National Advocates for Pregnant Women; Coya White Hat-Artichoker, a Sister Song board of directors member and founder of First Nations Two-Spirit Collective; Sujatha Jesudason, director of CoreAlign and founder of Generations Ahead; Hermelinda Cortes, rural and communications organizer from the Southerners on New Ground; Shaquita Borden, director of program development at Women With A Vision; and Sharia Monroe, founder and president of the International Center for Traditional Midwifery.

An exciting addition to Take Root this year will be a series of workshops conducted by Young People For (YP4). The workshops will be held on Friday, Feb. 21, prior to the Take Root conference. They will cover such topics as: power, privilege, oppression and intersectionality; allyship; and self-care and sustainability in the movement.

YP4 is "a long-term leadership development initiative that identifies, engages and empowers the newest generation of progressive leaders." (youngpeoplefor.org). YP4 identifies campus and community leaders and equips them with the knowledge and skills necessary to create social change in their communities.

As February approaches, we are getting more and more excited about this year's Take Root. With the addition of new speakers, YP4 and special guests, this year's Take Root could be the best one yet!
Faculty Spotlight: Megan Sibbett

Our newest faculty member, Megan Sibbett, already feels connected to Norman and loves the enthusiasm of OU’s WGS students. She became interested in the WGS program last year when she heard Jill Irvine speak at the National Women’s Studies Association conference. “I was wowed by the program and its faculty. As Jill spoke, I realized that the OU’s WGS program was an innovative leader in program building.”

As she finished her dissertation work at the University of Texas, San Antonio, where she focused on critiquing the war on terror through queer, transnational feminisms, she began thinking about Norman as a possible future home. Shortly after she and her partner moved here, they heard activist poet Lauren Zuniga perform “To the Oklahoma Progressives Plotting Mass Exodus.” “Chills went up my back,” she explained, “and I knew we were in the right place.” Raised in a small town in Wyoming and having lived in Utah, Idaho, and Texas, she values the way that issues central to women’s and gender studies are grappled with in spaces stereotypically seen as less-than-progressive (continued on page 7).
By Jill Irvine

It has been as busy as ever around the Women’s and Gender Studies Program and the Center for Social Justice this fall. We have sponsored award-winning events, taught more students than ever in our courses, and welcomed many new majors and minors to the program. I am struck every semester by the many topics our students and faculty engage with inside and outside the classroom. To name just a few so far this semester: women’s incarceration in Oklahoma, race in contemporary American society, human trafficking in Oklahoma and around the world, popular culture and body image, reproductive justice, LGBTQ activism and fair labor practices. We have explored these issues in a variety of events listening to panelists, advocates, experts and, perhaps most importantly, to one another.

This fall kicked off with three events exploring the experience of race in contemporary American society. The first of these events, After Trayvon, brought together more than 200 students, faculty and members of the community to hear panelists speak about the implications of the verdict in the Trayvon Martin case. A second event, “Know Justice, Know Peace,” featured stories from activists and advocates for a variety of issues, followed by discussions about how to put our education into action in the world. A third event, “The Race Card Project,” used the power of writing to help us explore our fears and hopes as we encounter individuals from diverse backgrounds in our every day lives. I would like to thank the many co-sponsors and participants in these events and, in particular, Center for Social Justice co-director Lupe Davidson and program coordinator Mallory Gladstein, for working so hard to make these events a success.

Race and intersecting marginalities have not been the only topics we have tackled this semester. Thanks to the wonderful energy and passion of our Activist-in-Residence Gwen Fields, we began an extended conversation on campus about the impact of women’s incarceration in Oklahoma, the highest per capita rate of women’s incarceration in the world, on Oklahoma’s families and children. At an event, “The Not So Merry Go Round,” Fields, Oklahoma State Senator Constance Johnson, Susan Sharp and Cherri Fuller highlighted to a packed room in the Oklahoma Memorial Union the human cost of Oklahoma’s sentencing policies and their impact on the next generation. A second event, exploring the devastating effect of the war on drugs on some of America’s poorest communities, will be held on January 23. The event will feature a screening of the film, The House I Live In, and invited speakers from around the country. I look forward to this and other upcoming events that do so much to enhance our knowledge of pressing issues and ways to respond to them.

Finally, I would like to welcome the many new members of our Women’s and Gender Studies community, including the numerous new WGS and SJ minors. We are excited that you are bringing your energy and interests to the program. Welcome also to the 10 new affiliate faculty members who have joined WGS this fall from colleges across the campus and to Megan Sibbett, who has joined the WGS Program as a new faculty member.

Faculty Spotlight: Megan Sibbett (continued)

Sibbett currently teaches Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies and an upper-division course titled “Gender and Terrorism.” The “Gender and Terrorism” course approaches the topics of violence, war and torture in alternative ways as students engage transnational cultural criticism, feminisms and queer theory. “Not only is it important to understand how gender, sexuality and race are mobilized within contexts of war, but to also have diverse theoretical tools to take things apart.”

She values the interdisciplinary nature of the introductory course and the ways students with different interests connect with the material. They recently finished reading For the Win, a novel about MMORPG’s, virtual sweatshop labor and labor rights organizing. “It is captivating to think about things that are seemingly unreal but have very real-world consequences, especially as we interpret the ways gender economies play out.” In the spring 2014 semester, Sibbett will teach “Queer Theory” and continue teaching Introduction to Women’s and Gender Studies.

Message From the Director

WGS Director Jill Irvine

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